

Angel In My Arms

A Free Holiday Read by
Dana Marie Bell



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Angel In My Arms
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He slipped into the shadows between two buildings and took off his coat and shirt. He allowed his true nature to take over, his wings glowing brightly before he slipped into invisibility. A Shem or a fellow Neph would be able to sense him if they tried hard enough, but he was completely masked to human senses, not even the glow of his wings lighting the walls of the alley. He spread his wings, the joy of flying free tainted by the knowledge that his wife was going to kill him.

No. First she'd kill Gabriel, *then* she'd kill him.

He landed on Gabriel's lawn five minutes late. He quickly folded away his wings and threw on his shirt as he dashed toward the door. Gabriel hated it when—

"You're late."

He winced as the leader of all the Nephilim, Gabriel Viator, turned to him, his strange, violet eyes brimming with frustration. "Sorry. This whole day is a mess."

"Tell me about it." Damien snorted and sipped his hot chocolate, all the while staring at his computer screen. "You'd think the Shem would give us a break on Christmas Eve, but nope. They just have to Grinch our asses."

Dante flicked a marshmallow at their brother. "It's not like they have office parties to go to, asshole."

Damien grinned. "*Va te faire foutre, trouduc.*"

Dante grinned right back. "*Testa di cazzo.*"

Gabriel sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Children."

The scene was so damn familiar Seth couldn't help but smile. It seemed they started off every meeting with Gabriel the same way, Dante and Damien cursing each other good-naturedly while Gabriel tried to pretend that it bothered him. Everyone knew how much he loved the rapport between Dante and Damien. In every respect but blood, they were true brothers, right down to stealing each other's toys and fighting over the last piece of cake.

If anyone hurt Damien, Dante was there to give them the beating of a lifetime, and vice versa.

The two settled down, Damien returning to his computer and Dante to staring out the window.

"Seth, how is Abby?" Gabriel's violet gaze landed on him, snaring him in the odd depths of the angel's eyes. "Is she well?"

Seth thought about the sweet woman who'd given herself to him, body and soul. He was truly a lucky man. "She's fine, sir. Her ankles are a little swollen, but that's to be expected. Her doctor says she's doing fine."

"When is she due?" Dante turned away from the window, his tone full of eager joy. Dante came from a huge Italian family where each new member was greeted with delight.

"Soon." He didn't have the exact date memorized. He was just thrilled her pregnancy was coming along so easily, the baby happy and healthy. They'd already picked out names and had gotten the nursery set up, ready for the new addition. A little baby Nephilim he could love and nurture and train to someday take his place as one of Gabriel's warriors.

"We're looking forward to greeting him or her." Gabriel shot him a knowing look. They'd told him they didn't want to know the sex of the baby, and so far Gabriel, who obviously knew, had kept it secret.

Seth glanced at the clock and winced. Oh, he was *so* dead. Abby was going to geld him if he didn't get a move-on. "Tell me I'm not going hunting tonight."

"You're not going hunting tonight."

Seth nearly collapsed with relief. "Then I need to get home. Bill and Trish are coming for dinner."

Dante smirked at him. "Let me guess. Abby is making enchiladas."

"Nope. Tamales." Seth smiled sheepishly as the others laughed.

Gabriel waved him off. "Enjoy your evening, Seth, and Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you too, sir. Stay safe, my brothers."

"Stay safe, my brother." The traditional farewell of the Nephilim followed him out the door as he spread his wings and flew back to the arms of the woman he loved.

Abby set the final touches to her dinner table, rubbing the small of her back as she stood. The kid had his foot stuck between her ribs again, and getting him to move it was like trying to get Bill to eat liver. It just wasn't happening.

She stared at the clock and sighed. Seth was late. Like, way late. He was supposed to have been home over an hour ago, ready to help her set the table and cook the meal, but Abby had been forced to do all of it by herself. She just hoped her husband hadn't been held up by one of the monsters who hunted in the dark. The Shem were angel-born who had given themselves over to their baser desires, becoming demonic in both appearance and temperament. Like the Nephilim, they had the ability to appear as human as Abby, but underneath they were twisted monsters out of nightmares and legends. It was the job of Nephilim like Seth to hunt them down and keep humanity safe from their depravities. The Shemyaza wouldn't consider Christmas Eve to be sacred. If anything, they'd probably do their best to desecrate it. So she closed her eyes and prayed that for tonight at least all would be quiet.

The doorbell rang, and Abby let loose a curse. Her brother was here, and her husband was not. She waddled to the door and opened it, still rubbing her lower back. This kidlet couldn't pop out soon enough to please her. "Hey, guys! Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, sis." Bill hugged her so tightly it caused the kidlet to squirm and Abby to gasp.

"Back still bothering you?" Trish's tone was sympathetic. Bill and Trish had been on the receiving end of her groans of frustration more than once. Abby might be thrilled that she was carrying Seth's child, but that didn't mean she loved the swollen ankles or the back pain that came with it.

And if she didn't have a first floor powder room, they'd have some ungodly messes to clean up. She'd never peed so much in her life. "Oh, God yes." Abby groaned as Trish took off her coat and hung it in the closet. "I swear, if this kid isn't kicking my ribs he's dancing on my bladder."

Bill shared a look with Trish. "Ah. Guess we have that to look forward to."

Trish snarled. "What's this we shit?"

Abby froze. Was Bill saying what she thought he was? "You're pregnant?"

Trish nodded, her cheeks going red.

"Oh, my God! You're pregnant!" Abby squealed and threw herself into Trish's arms. "Congratulations!"

Bill was watching them with an indulgent smile. "We just confirmed it like two days ago."

“Best Christmas present ever.” Trish was giggling, giddy with happiness. “My parents are beside themselves.”

Abby let Trish go only to throw herself in her brother’s arms. “Congrats, bro. Do mom and dad know?”

“Yeah, I called them yesterday. They wanted all the details, and mom insists we come down there as soon as the holidays are over.”

Abby’s smile dimmed a bit. Their mother had been horribly scarred in a house fire that claimed the life of their younger brother. She rarely left the house these days, but her view of the beach was gorgeous, and in all respects save one she’d managed to go on with her life. Abby had wanted her parents to come to her for the holidays, but they couldn’t, nor could they host the family this year. The cold weather played havoc with Carol Marcheson’s body, causing nerve endings damaged by the fire to flare in painful ways. Their father, Kevin, had taken her to their Florida condo for the winter months. Abby would have to be content with the knowledge that they wished her and Seth well, and visit them once her baby had been born. Abby respected the limitations her mother’s health problems placed on her, and didn’t blame her in the least for choosing to remain in her beautiful, warm home.

“Dad told me she’s doing a little better, and maybe we can all visit once they’re back.” Bill let her go, patting her shoulder sympathetically before taking his coat off and handing it to his wife to hang up. “And he said to tell you that when you finally spawn, mom will be there, even if she’s in a wheelchair and doped to the gills.”

“That’s good.” Abby might respect her mother’s limitations, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t worried about her.

“Where’s Seth?” Trish took a seat in Abby’s living room. They’d managed to sell Seth’s townhouse and had decided to hold on to hers until the house Seth was building for them was finished. He’d sworn it would be ready before the baby came, and she believed him. Seth always did as he said he would, something she’d come to rely on greatly.

“He’s meeting with some friends before he comes home.” Trish and Ben didn’t know about Seth’s other job, that of a Nephilim, and Abby planned to keep it that way.

“That cop friend of his, Dante?” Trish fanned herself. “I wouldn’t mind seeing him again. He’s *so* hot.”

“Hey!” Ben glared at his wife. “What am I, chopped liver?”

Trish stared at him. “Aw, sweetie. You know I love you, but can you croon at me in Italian?” He grumbled under his breath.

Abby rolled her eyes and waddled into the kitchen, pouring two ginger ales and one glass of wine. “Ben, give me a hand, will you?”

Ben took the wine and one of the ginger ales, handing the bubbling soda to his wife. “No wine for you.”

“Not until the spawn pops out, anyway.” Abby sipped her ginger ale.

“At least I can still have coffee.”

“Decaf, sure.” Abby giggled as Trish groaned. “Oh, and careful on the chocolate, since that has caffeine in it.”

Trish glared at her husband. “I hate you so much right now.”

The front door opened and Seth walked in, cheeks bright with the cold. He was shivering under his parka. “Hey, guys, sorry I’m late.”

Abby waddled over and took his briefcase. “You flew?” she whispered.

He nodded. “Didn’t want to be too late.” His teeth were beginning to chatter.

It was far too cold out there for anyone, even an angel, to go without a shirt, let alone a coat. Abby took his parka and shoved him toward the living room. “Go warm up by the fire. I’ll bring you some hot chocolate.”

It was a measure of how chilled he was that he didn’t even bother to argue. He greeted Ben and Trish, explaining that he’d been so eager to get home he hadn’t even bothered to let the car warm up before driving away from his friend’s house. While Abby made the hot chocolate Ben and Trish filled Seth in on their news.

“Congrats, Trish!” Seth hugged her, making her squeal when his cold hands touched her skin.

Ben laughed as Trish started to beat Seth off of her. “Get off my wife, Frosty.”

“Oh, good idea.” Abby put on some Christmas music, starting with her favorite, Nat King Cole. Seth had asked that she play Trans Siberian Orchestra and, God help her, Trish had emailed and told her to pick up Chipmunk Christmas music. Ben was the only one who didn’t seem to have an opinion one way or the other.

“When will your parents and Eli be here, Seth?” Abby went over the preparations in her head, hoping her timing wasn’t off.

“They should be here soon.” Seth hugged her from behind, his freezing hands covering her protruding stomach. “Piotr said he might stop in as well.”

Abby sighed and leaned back against him. “Good. Most of our family will be here, then.”

He pressed his face against the side of her neck, and she could feel his content sigh. “It’s so wonderful that you consider Piotr family.”

“Of course. He’s your best friend and one of your brothers. It’s a given that he’s family, along with Dante and Damien and the rest of them.” In fact, she’d thought of inviting all of his Neph brothers, but she just didn’t have the room.

The soft kiss he gave her wasn’t remotely marred by how cold his lips were. He shivered and reached for the hot chocolate. “I’ll call mom and see if they’re on their way. You go sit for a while.” He turned her and patted her rear. “And don’t tell me your back is fine, because we both know it’s not.”

Someone was feeling better already. “Yes, dear.”

“Hey, Mom.” Seth grinned as his mother picked up. “Are you on your way?”

“We’ll be there in ten minutes. How’s my daughter?”

Seth’s smile got so wide his cheeks hurt. “She’s fine. Her back is sore and her ankles look like cantaloupes, but otherwise she’s good. The doc says everything looks normal.” Seth made sure he was at every appointment Abby had. The first time they’d seen their baby on an ultrasound, he’d actually cried.

“Good. Tell her I’ll help with dinner once I get there, and she’s not to argue.” Marian and Joe van Licht had adored Abby Marcheson the moment they met her. When they’d discovered she was pregnant and that Seth had asked her to marry him, they’d been over the moon. Now Abigail van Licht had two mothers who got along famously. In fact, he was willing to bet his parents would make the time to visit Carol and Kevin. Now that his father was retired it was easier for them to move around. In fact, Carol had suggested that Marion and Joe buy a little condo near their own.

No doubt Marion would talk Joe into it. She'd been making noises about getting a vacation home for a while now. "I'll tell her, but don't imagine she'll listen for even a second."

"Hmph." The amusement in his mother's tone had him laughing softly. "Fine. Oh, and Eli says to let you know that Piotr called him."

"Why?" Seth immediately went on alert. If Piotr needed Eli, an Oracle, then he might need Seth as well. All Neph hunted in threes unless there was no other choice. It was dangerous to send a single Nephilim hunting. "Do you think—"

"No." His mother cut him off. "It wasn't anything like that, but he seemed worried about Piotr. He thinks Piotr is going to need him soon, but not quite yet."

"What about Raphael? He's been missing for a while." And Seth couldn't stop worrying about him. Hell, even Gabriel was concerned, and the angel was always careful to keep his concerns under wraps.

Marion knew exactly what he was trying to say. "No. Eli said, and I quote, it's not time yet." Shit. Then Raphael really *was* in trouble.

"Seth?"

Seth turned to find Abby staring at him, the concern in her huge, golden-brown eyes sending him across the kitchen to press a kiss to her forehead. "Shh. It's mom. She's on her way. Eli had a few things to say, but there's nothing we can do about it right now."

"Are you sure?"

Seth knew his wife. She'd cancel everything if she thought he needed to aid his family. "I'm sure." He reached out and caressed her cheek, smiling when she leaned into him. "Go sit with Ben and Trish. Try and keep them from killing each other."

She smiled and walked back into the living room. She might say she waddled, or waded, but to Seth she was even sexier now than she had been when they first got together. How she could see herself as anything but perfect he'd never know.

"Seth? We're almost there. We'll talk some more tomorrow, all right?"

"All right." He wasn't happy about it, but he'd learned over the years that the last thing you could rush was an Oracle. He'd tell you what you needed to know only when the vision came to him. Trying to force the visions could result in the Oracle getting absolutely nothing, even if they were supposed to help. It was the most frustrating of the Nephilim powers, but also one of the most dangerous. Seth firmly believed that it was because of the Oracles that the Shemyaza had yet to win the war. "Love you."

"Love you too."

Seth put his cell phone back in his pocket and picked up his mug. He joined Abby on the sofa, smiling as she giggled uncontrollably. "What did you do to my wife?"

Trish shot him an innocent look. "Nothing, I swear."

"She's as innocent as New York snow." Ben ducked as Trish threw one of Abby's tasseled pillows at him.

Just watching Abby, Trish and Ben soothed something inside Seth. Knowing they were safe and happy, that nothing had harmed them or could harm them while he was there, kept the worry over his friends at bay. Seeing the joy in Abby, the affection and love in Trish and Ben, reminded him of what was important. Despite his concern over Rafe and Piotr, he felt himself relaxing, enjoying a quiet Christmas Eve with the people who loved him.

When his parents finally arrived, blowing in with even more laughter, more hugs, and an extra helping of joy, his evening was complete. Eli, who he hadn't seen in months, couldn't get over how pregnant Abby was, how happy Seth's life had become. Eli had been on assignment when Seth and Abby got married by Gabriel and hadn't yet met her. She was so different from Fiona. Fiona had been cool, collected, warm only to those most intimate with her. Abby loved on everyone equally, to the point that Seth had to bite his tongue. And he did, because the things that had happened in her past should have made her a recluse, terrified of her own shadow. Instead, her strength and determination not to allow her abusive ex-boyfriend to win had allowed her to overcome her fears and remain a loving person.

Seth was so proud of her he could burst.

Still, he understood Eli's surprise at the way Abby greeted him, hugging him like they were long-lost friends. Soon she had even Eli, who tended to hold himself back, laughing along with her.

When the doorbell rang Seth answered, knowing who was on the other side. "*Zdravstvuyte , moy brat.*"

Piotr's glacial gray eyes warmed instantly. "*Zdravstvuyte , moy brat.*" The two embraced, Seth pounding Piotr on the back.

Piotr hissed. "Careful."

Seth pulled back. "You all right?"

Piotr winced. "A Shem Azar got me." His expression became evil. "But I got him better."

"Good." Seth was more careful as he led Piotr into the house. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet my best friend, Piotr Romanov."

Trish and Ben went wide-eyed, but Seth's family didn't bat an eye.

Piotr bowed slightly, bringing out the old world charm. "*Svetlym Rozhdestvom.*"

Trish shivered and leaned toward Ben. "Forget Italian. Learn Russian."

Everyone laughed. Even Piotr smirked as he bowed specifically to Trish. "You've met Dante Zucco?"

She nodded and stood. "Oh, yeah." Without thought, Trish took hold of Piotr's hand and dragged the startled man into the room, forcing him to become part of the group. That was Trish's charm. She never gave a thought to the fact that she was pushing a bazillionaire down on Abby's sofa, or grilling him like a cheeseburger, or draping herself over him to reply to something Ben had said. To Trish, Piotr was family, so she treated him accordingly.

From the occasional glimpse of his friend's face that Seth got, Piotr was enjoying himself immensely.

Abby slid next to him, cuddling up against him. "He seems to be having a good time."

"Mm-hmm."

"Think we should get him drunk?"

Seth laughed. "Good luck with that. The man drinks premium vodka like it's water."

"Damn." Abby pouted. "I wanted to see him do the bunny hop."

Seth caught Piotr's amused glance before Piotr's attention was diverted by Marian, who dragged the confused man into the kitchen and began ordering him around as if he were one of her own sons. "I'd love to see him do the chicken dance."

"I told you we should have had a reception. It would have been worth it just to see that." Abby giggled. "Oh, Gangam Style!" She began to wiggle her hips, tempting him despite the room full of people. God, he couldn't wait until everyone left and he could get her under him, naked and panting.

“I’d pay to see that.” He put his arms around her, hugging her close. “I’d pay more to see Dante do it.”

“With Beth?” She wagged her brows. “She’d *love* that.”

Seth snickered. Dante had the hots for the PI. Even Seth could see it, no matter how much Dante denied it. “Oh, yeah.” Watching the man forced to make nice with Elizabeth Rand was the highlight of his day.

“That sounded pretty dirty, Mr. van Licht.” She giggled again. “I didn’t know you were a voyeur.”

He leaned down and nipped at her earlobe. “Only when it comes to you.”

“Naughty angel.” She shivered as he kissed the side of her neck. “I like that about you.”

“Children, dinner!”

Seth huffed out a laugh at his mother’s bellow. He laughed even harder when Piotr discreetly rubbed his ear. He’d been standing right next to Marion when she’d yelled. “Coming!”

“You wish.”

He nodded dolefully. Oh, how he wished. But as Gabriel often said, patience was a virtue. Too bad he wasn’t feeling very virtuous at the moment.

Abby wrapped her arm around his waist and began pulling him to the kitchen table. “You know something? I think this might be the best Christmas I’ve had in a long time. No monsters in the windows, no fear for our lives, and our family around us. What more could you ask for?”

Seth glanced around at his parents, his brother Eli, Piotr, Trish and Ben, and had to agree. “There are only a few things that would make it better.” As the Chimpunks began to play on the stereo he winced. “And that isn’t it.”

They joined the family around the table, laughing at Trish’s taste in music, his personal angel still in his arms. Abby was right. Despite the sounds of rodents on helium, it didn’t get much better than this.